

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

24 February 2012

Mr. Tony Snyder, President
Michigan State Chapter
National Wild Turkey Federation

Dear Mr. Snyder:

Thank you for your telephone call. The questions being asked are important and, indeed, are at the heart of larger issues in wildlife conservation. Unfortunately, I'm on my way out of town, so please allow me to provide a brief response.

Do we need an annual population survey for wild turkeys? If the context for this question is that statistically sound techniques are readily available for conducting surveys to obtain annual statewide estimates wild turkey population and Michigan should implement them, then the short answer is no. Michigan, like many states, uses harvest statistics to provide trend information about statewide wild turkey populations (are they increasing or decreasing?) and thorough records have been maintained for 25 years. However, estimating actual abundance of wild turkeys has proven to be challenging. There are a variety of techniques that have been used to estimate wild turkey abundance at local scales, but we have yet to find a survey technique that can be applied with statistical rigor on a statewide scale.

Should we begin annually testing a random sample of wild turkeys for disease? If the context for the question is concern that disease is causing a decline in wild turkey populations in Michigan, then the short answer is probably no. Historically, disease was a crucial issue for wild turkey management. However, most of the concern for wild turkeys was related to game-farm birds and the last serious issue of which I'm aware occurred in the mid-1980s. If disease is playing a large role in wild turkey population dynamics in Michigan, then we should be seeing significant numbers of diseased carcasses. I recommend contacting Dr. Steve Schmitt who leads Michigan's Diagnostic Clinic for Population and Animal Health to learn if this is the case. In the absence of significant numbers of diseased carcasses, there seems little reason to initiate a large monitoring effort.

Nevertheless, I understand the concern about downward trends in Michigan's wild turkey populations. I am aware that fall harvest numbers are down from a high in the years 2000 and 2001. My experience with the dynamics of wild turkey populations is based principally on work in New York State where we used fall harvest as a measure of abundance. There, our research showed that most of the annual fluctuation was attributable to spring weather, likely through its impact on nesting success. Were I to speculate on why wild turkey populations in Michigan are up some years and down in others, I would begin with weather and habitat, rather than disease.

I would be pleased to offer more detailed comments at a later time. I look forward to talking with you further.

Sincerely,
William F. Porter
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Boone and Crockett Professor of Wildlife Conservation



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